

'Leery Optimism' at Home for Kennedy Visitor

At noon Monday a small man with a brush mustache will sit down to lunch at the White House with President Kennedy. Although his arrival in Washington Saturday was almost unnoticed, he's the newly elected president of one of the most stable countries in South America.

His name is Guillermo Leon Valencia, and for the next four years (he takes office Aug. 7) he'll be president of Colombia. He and his wife are mainly in the United States for checkups at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore—an unofficial visit which doesn't rate elaborate State Department protocol. But while he's here, he will discuss the Alliance for Progress and other matters with officials in Washington.

No chief of state is in a more anomalous position than Dr. Valencia. Although he was elected last May 6 by an almost 2-1 margin over all other candidates, no one is sure what kind of president he will be. In the nation's cold, gray capital of Bogotá, the outlook can be described as leery optimism. Dr. Valencia as a colorful Conservative politician was one thing, observers say; Dr. Valencia as president may be quite another.

Some Shocking Statements

Among other things, the president-elect has a tendency to shock people. In one campaign speech he promised to have his children shot if they ever discredited the family name. He flabbergasted financiers by calling for "more social justice and less economic planning." And of his new position, he says that all presidents need "a little bit of the dementia."

Yet on the other hand, Dr. Valencia is considered staunchly pro-American. In the North American press he has been described as "a man of courage and integrity, a Gallant Romantic, and—in a phrase that curled a few hairs—as "a pre-capitalist man, who is bound to be on the side of the poor people because there is nothing he despises so much as the bourgeoisie."

In Colombia, press notices like these will not hurt a man. But they also reinforce the general notion of Dr. Valencia as "impractical." They are disquieting to those who see the present era as one in which hard-nose, practical politics are not only a rule but a law of survival.

How, with all these reservations about Dr. Valencia, was he ever elected president? The answer lies in recent Colombian history. After more than a decade of anarchy and violence, the nation overthrew dictator Rojas Pinilla in 1957. To guard against the emergence of another Rojas, it adopted a curious constitution.

Only two parties were permitted—Liberals and Conservatives. The presidency, the constitution provided, would alternate between them every four years. (The out-



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IN TRIUMPH: Confetti bedecked President Guillermo Leon Valencia of Colombia (center) is seen as he appeared just after his arrival in Popayan, Colombia, last month.

two-thirds majority to pass a bill into law. The Gran Coalicion will not have a working majority in the lower house, where the most they can come up with (even assuming victories in several districts still undergoing recounts) is 110 of 182 seats.

Bare Majority in Senate

In the Senate the coalition has unofficially squeezed by. With several elections still being contested the administration holds 68 out of 98 seats, two more than the necessary majority.

This means, in effect, that Dr. Valencia is going to have to deal with the MRL, which climbed from 16 to 34 (of 91 Liberal) seats in the lower house, and from zero to 14 in the Senate. Just what this is going to mean for the administration's programs is a question mark. President Lleras Camargo, even with a theoretical majority, managed to pass an Agrarian Reform Law only because of a special provision requiring only a 50 per cent majority for "bills of a social nature."

The Agrarian Reform law is a good indication of where the various factions stand. The law provides for the government to buy land at its commercial value and re-sell it to small farmers at the same price.

The MRL says this is phony reform. They want the government to buy land at its tax assessed value plus 20 per cent, and re-sell it at that price. If the small farmers could afford to buy land at its market value, says the MRL, they would have bought it long ago.

Agreed on the Alliance

Both the MRL and Dr. Valencia are agreed on the basic value of the Alliance

for Progress—and on the need to spend more Alliance funds on necessities and less on what Dr. Valencia calls "merely useful items such as expensive superhighways." Both are agreed, too, that the biggest boost the United States could give Colombia would be to help "stabilize" the price of coffee on the world market. In two years the coffee price has fallen from approximately 45 to about 39 cents a pound—and Colombia depends on coffee for 77 per cent of its export earnings.

On these issues, as on most other questions of progress and reform, most people are agreed that something should be done. It is the methods and details and degrees that cause arguments. Yet a small difference of opinion on a major program can derail it entirely.

Youth vs. 'the Oligarchy'

In Colombia, the capital-lettered Liberal-Conservative split is not nearly so wide as the liberal-conservative split. In both parties the new generation is nipping at the heels of what they call "the oligarchy." Young Conservatives Misael Pastrana and Belizaria Betancur, for instance, are more "liberal" than Liberal party boss Lleras Restrepo.

In the end it is an old story, the problem of turning words into accomplishments—and at the same time, dealing with diverse quirks, jealousies, opinions, and prejudices.

This is Leon Valencia's problem. He is an impressive orator, but now he will have to do a lot more than talk. Colombia has made much progress in the past four years, and Alberto Lleras Camargo is a big man to measure up to. This is why Bogota is expressing leery optimism, and why nobody is quite sure what the fact of President Valencia is going to mean.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON



Lleras Camargo



Lopez Michelsen

going Liberal president, Alberto Lleras Camargo, was elected in 1958.) This situation will continue until 1974, when Colombia will revert to a less-regulated form of democracy.

This is, in effect, a legalized truce between the two traditional factions in the nation's politics. And they have taken to it rather well, forming a high-powered coalition that amounts to one-party rule. Both parties had a hand, for instance, in selecting Dr. Valencia to run for president.

Yet there still are more than two schools of thought in Colombian politics, if not more than two official parties. The Conservatives, for instance, are fragmented between "official" Conservatives, led by ex-president (1946-50) Ospina Perez, and "maverick" right-wing Conservatives under the leadership of ex-president Laureano Gomez (1950-53). The Luranistas, as they are called, refused to go along with the ruling coalition in the last election because they don't like Dr. Valencia. He was picked, they say, because he was "the only Conservative the Liberals could trust."

There is a good bit of truth in that statement. According to nearly everyone in Colombia, the main reason Dr. Valencia is president-elect is that he had the all-out backing of Liberal party chief Carlos Lleras Restrepo.

A Political Maverick

The Liberals are fragmented, too. Mr. Lleras Restrepo is opposed by the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal (MRL), which has been characterized as "anti-American" and "soft on Castro." This description, however, probably is an oversimplification. The MRL candidate for president, Alfonso Lopez Michelsen (son of Alfonso Lopez, president from 1934 to 1938 and again from 1942 to 1945), is aligned to the left of the ruling coalition.

Although Mr. Lopez Michelsen would have been constitutionally barred from the presidency if he had won, the "out" groups of both official parties can—and do—win Congressional seats. And in the last Congressional election March 18, the MRL made some surprising gains.

In what was widely interpreted as a smashing victory, the ruling coalition pulled 61 per cent of the total vote. But what was not widely interpreted is the fact that the Colombian congress requires a

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